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ABSTRACT

It is the purpose of this paper to provide an overview of the work experience concept for speech communication students. This examination is contained in the following four sections: the student and a rationale for work experience, the professor and a rationale for work experience, the process for maintaining a work experience program, and difficulties faced in a work experience program. Students should participate in a work experience program because a student with practical experience in speech communication is in a better position to get a job; the limitations of the classroom make it hard to learn; and in such a program a student can see the relationship between speech communication and the organizational modifications of bureaucracy. Teachers will find such a program useful as it helps to explain theory in terms of practical needs for improved communication. (TS)

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WORK EXPERIENCE PROGRAMS FOR SPEECH COMMUNICATION STUDENTS: A TIME FOR INCREASED EMPHASIS

by

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WORK EXPERIENCE PROGRAMS FOR SPEECH COMMUNICATION STUDENTS: A TIME FOR INCREASED EMPHASIS

Many of those who watch trends in higher education have observed the changes which are underway with regard to the demands students are making upon the courses of study which they choose. With the plentiful job situations available in the late sixties, students asked that coursework offer them something meaningful. Philosophical, self-actualizing pursuits were sought during those years. As the job market tightened and students found themselves with less saleable skills at graduation than they might have otherwise wished for, there was a gradual movement toward college coursework which offered the kind of pragmatic training which would assure them of a more competitive position among other graduates of four year institutions.

This change in student demands is coupled with a decrease in the available jobs in such areas as secondary and higher education. Whereas most of the undergraduate majors in speech or speech communication once became teachers upon graduation or went on to graduate school, later becoming teachers, changes in the demand for teachers is altering that market as well as many others. Many students who complete an undergraduate major in speech communication must face the same market in business and governmental sectors of the economy as the business major.

We must face the possibility of losing undergraduate majors in speech communication to other departments unless we can provide training consistent with the demands which the economy is now making upon the university and its students. One response to the need for a program which provides more saleable skills is the work-experience program for speech communication majors. A career-related work experience program is a program which offers the student

an opportunity to participate in the activities of an agency or organization which is exogenous to the university. Such agencies might include business organizations, the various levels of government, churches, volunteer organizations, welfare organizations, etc. Choice of an organization should depend upon the student's career interests and study of various aspects of speech communication. The nature of the student's activities will of course, depend upon the organization, but such activities might include administrative duties, teaching or training, research, etc.

It is the purpose of this paper to provide an overview of the work experience concept for speech communication students. This examination is contained in the following four sections: (1) the student and a rationale for work experience, (2) the professor and a rationale for work experience, (3) the process for maintaining a work experience program and (4) difficulties faced by a work experience program.

The Student and a Rationale for Work Experience

From the student's perspective the rationale for work experience programs is contained in the following three issues. Already mentioned is the practical nature of such programs. A student receives a real-world understanding of the role of communication in an organization or agency. This practical understanding should make the student's knowledge of the theory of communication more saleable. Pointing to practical experience in speech communication, a student should be, upon graduation, in a better position to persuade the potential employer of his or her capabilities. While some academicians in the field of speech communication may argue that such pragmatic considerations cannot be the rationale for instruction in speech communication, it seems appropriate to remember that our students are seeking theoretical knowledge which corresponds as closely as possible to the real world situation.

A second reason for implementing a work experience program is the limitations of the classroom. An important aspect of the classroom learning experience mandates the kind of learning that a student obtains in the day-to-day environment of an organization or agency. The relative importance of the theoretical aspects of a body of knowledge may be quite divergent from the relative importance of those same elements in the practical day-to-day activities of an organization. A student who participates in a work experience program has the opportunity to place the theory which he or she has learned in the context of the real-world demands of a business, governmental, or other agency. In this context the student obtains a better idea of the needs and wants of the organization which depends upon its interpersonal and organizational communication for transferring organizational norms, motivating employees, maintaining the structural links of the organizational network, etc. Of very basic importance to this entire process, then, is the fact that the student is forced to implement the theory which we are teaching in the classroom. Thus the student is forced to reexamine and reconsider the theory in the light of its usefulness. Such a process should benefit the student by forcing analysis of theory, relearning of the theory and understanding the application of the theory.

A third reason for the student's participation in a work experience program is the inherent limitation of any discipline including speech communication. Viewed from a macro-perspective, any discipline fits into a larger context of the physical and psychological worlds of man. In the speech communication field, hardly anyone would claim independence from other disciplines such as politics, philosophy, psychology, etc. The student who has the opportunity to participate in a work experience program becomes cognizant of additional factors which affect speech communication but which are not specifically discussed in

the speech communication classroom. Thus the student will, in an organizational context, see the relationship between speech communication and the various organizational modifications of bureaucracy.

The Professor and a Rationale for Work Experience

Although benefits to the student of any learning experience are also benefits to an instructor, given his or her interest in the student's increasing knowledge, there are at least three other benefits derived by the instructor of speech communication from such a program as is under discussion. First, an instructor is forced into contact with organizations and agencies outside of the university. This not only broadens the instructor's own learning, but such contacts may offer him or her opportunities for training managers or others in such agencies. Second, contact with agencies exogenous to the university forces the professor to reevaluate his own thinking in light of the practical needs of such agencies for training and research in speech communication. Finally, such contacts should provide the instructor with useful examples for explaining theory in light of practical needs for improved communication.

The Process for Maintaining a Work Experience Program

In order to achieve these benefits for student and teacher, it is necessary that careful attention be given to the development of a work experience program. The following five point process should give the reader some idea of the process for developing a program in work experience. First, it is necessary to obtain and nuture contacts outside the university. This is probably the most difficult aspect of implementing a work experience program. It is dependent on the instructor possessing some contacts or being able to

make some contacts who will allow the invasion of students. The demands for privacy of some business organizations and the previous experience of some firms with students who were not motivated make this more difficult than it first appears. Nevertheless, it can be done given enough energy and time.

It is necessary that the instructor work closely with the agency prior to the arrival of any students. Some agencies may be willing to introduce such a program; however, they may not recognize the demands in time and direction which are required of organizational incumbents. It is the responsibility of the instructor to outline the responsibilities of the agency in this relationship between student and agent. Expectations of student and expectations of the agency should parallel each other. Such preliminary preparations help to approximate a parallel.

The third aspect of the process is the follow-up with the student. Considerations must be given to determining whether goals are met. At this point in the process, the instructor is responsible for assisting the student in integrating the practical experience with the relevant theory.

Fourth, the instructor should follow-up the student's work experience with a conversation with the appropriate individuals in the firm or agency. This is important for at least two reasons. It is necessary to determine how and when another student might be directed to the agency or organization, and it is necessary in order to further cultivate the agency's cooperation.

The process is not complete, however, without a fifth element--reevaluation of the instructor's own teaching. Such an experience for the instructor should result in the kind of alterations in teaching which lead to more interesting classes and additional ideas for courses and research projects.

Difficulties Faced by a Work Experience Program

Although the work experience sounds exciting, it is also fraught with some difficulties. Paramount among the difficulties is the maintenance of contacts with exogenous agencies. Development of these contacts will, in all probability, come only slowly. Maintaining the contacts and the program will require that the instructor devote some time to the program. Without the dedication of time and energy to the process, there is little hope for its success. A second difficulty is assuring that students do a good job for cooperating agencies. If the early students are not what was expected by the agencies, there probably will be no future program, at least in those agencies. Business and governmental organizations have instrumental purposes, which, in all likelihood, do not include the education of America's youth. Consequently, the instructor who wishes to begin such a program must attempt to send only those students who will recognize the benefits from such a program and will therefore be motivated. A third difficulty is especially relevant to an instructor's available time. The follow-up with the student must be such that it will integrate the theory with the experience. The student cannot be allowed to substitute experience for theory, nor should we allow the substitution of theory for practical training, where necessary. It therefore becomes mandatory that the instructor integrate the experience with relevant theory.

In summary, it may be noted that the career-related work experience program offers numerous advantages to the discipline of speech communication. Such advantages may be considered from the pragmatic consideration of enhancing interest in the discipline or from the perspective of the needs and values for students in such a program. Given such advantages as have been described herein, it seems appropriate for the discipline to begin the active development of such programs in our departments. The immedicacy of this need is

apparent from many viewpoints; necessarily, the time which is consumed in developing the kind of contacts which are appropriate to such a program will consume some time before the program can become fully operative. Clearly, the time is now appropriate for speech communication departments to devote major effort in the area of career-related work experience programs for their students.